



**1 Self-reliant:** Nur 'Adilah prefers being independent although the varsity provides "buddies" for disabled students.

**2 Helpful friends:** Christina's peers and varsity staff are raising funds to buy a new wheelchair for her.

**3 Quick and convenient:** Sharifah Murnira is pleased with the recent introduction of the special bus service.

**4 Zooming in:** Nurul Diana uses a mini telescope to see the board clearly when taking down lecture notes.

**5 Fighting prejudices:** Muhammad Nur Iman (seated) says the biggest challenge is in fending off society's stigma against disabled people. With him is fellow UPM special needs student Muhammad Fadhi Baharuddin.

**Appreciative:** Jeslinda says the varsity's security guards are often on hand to help and describes them as 'total strangers but with great humanity in them'.

By SANDHYA MENON  
educate@thestar.com.my

**BEING PARAPLEGIC** after a tragic car accident did not prevent Jeslinda Paul Devasahayam from learning and growing as a person. A year after being involved in a hit-and-run accident, Jeslinda enrolled in a business course.

"It was difficult at first, but it was pointless wallowing in self pity," she says. Jeslinda, 24, who is now pursuing a business degree at Sunway College Victoria University.

"It's a big change for me but I need to have qualifications in order to find a job and be independent," she said.

The Government is supportive of disabled people wishing to pursue higher education.

## Going the extra mile

Students with disabilities are thankful for the measures taken by the nation's public and private universities in making their learning journey a pleasant one.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and the Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025 are clear about the needs of students with disabilities.

Both documents mention about how our education system aspires to be "holistic, accessible and inclusive".

In Jeslinda's case, this has been translated into a disabled-friendly approach at her campus – the university provides her with a designated parking lot that's close to her lecture halls, while security guards are often on hand to help her and others with special needs.

In the public education sector, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh had said that 80 special needs students were offered places in the nation's 20 public universities for the first semester of the 2015/2016 session.

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) student Sharifah Murnira Syed Kamal praised the varsity for being attentive towards students with special needs.

"The varsity has upgraded and increased its existing facilities by installing more elevators and ramps," adds Sharifah Murnira, 21, who has hemiplegia palsy after suffering from a bout of fever as an infant. The condition limits her muscular movements.

She adds that it is convenient to attend classes as the lecture halls are at accessible locations with ample parking space for students like her.

With 31 students with special needs, UPM has been hailed for its recent introduction of a special bus service.

They ferry the students from their hostels to their lecture halls, with buses arriving every 15 minutes.

Sharifah Murnira also credits supportive UPM staff as a plus factor.

"It is easy to communicate with the staff as they are helpful ... so it makes it so much easier for special needs students like me," she adds.

Despite limited movement in her left arm, Sharifah Murnira continues to participate in most varsity activities with her coursemates as she deems such interaction important.

"It helps us (special needs students) to feel included and appreciated in programmes and activities organised by the varsity."

Fellow student at UPM, Muhammad Nur Iman Ghazali, 21, agreed with her, saying he enjoys being involved in activities conducted by the university.

"There are many volunteers in the university who help us with our course work. They also look into our medical needs and provide walking sticks for students who need them."

Taylor's University is also moving in the right direction in hosting special needs students.

Christina Kang Xiaoxi, 24, is thankful that the university not only provides her with transport for medical check-ups, but also schedules her classes in such a way that she has enough time for physiotherapy sessions.

Hailing from China, the first year

software engineering student is embraced by staff and fellow students alike.

Seeing that her existing wheelchair has faulty brakes, they joined hands to raise funds to buy a new wheelchair for Christina, who suffers from a spinal cord injury.

"Lecturers at Taylor's University are encouraged to spend more time with special needs students," says its Counselling and Psychological Services Centre and Health Services Centre head Marian Elizabeth Arumugam.

"They are reminded to speak clearly and slowly into the microphone. The lecturers must make it a point to ensure that disabled students understand and keep up with their course work," she says, adding that the university organises peer support meetings twice a week for more than 100 special needs students there.

Over at Universiti Malaya (UM), its well known disabled friendly infrastructure makes it an attractive choice for those with physical impairments.

"UM has provided excellent facilities like ramps and special walkways for the visually impaired," says hearing impaired doctoral candidate Hanafiah Shamsudin, 54.

Born with a defective right ear, he has also suffered from gradual hearing loss in his left ear.

UM's Counselling and Career administrative officer Muhammad Firdaus Abu Hassan says the varsity has 170 student volunteers, otherwise known as "buddies", to help special needs students.



**Friends in need:** Muhammad Firdaus says student volunteers known as 'buddies' help those with disabilities.

"They assist special needs students – from reading for the visually-impaired to assisting them in completing their projects," says Muhammad Firdaus who is visually impaired himself.

Other than empowerment programmes to help special needs students interact with their peers, the varsity's "inclusive policy" also goes towards boosting awareness among students and staff.

Fellow UM student Nur 'Adilah Nazri, 26, praised UM for its policy, saying it made it easier for her to join the university's clubs without feeling left out.

"Despite having volunteers to help students like me, I prefer being independent," says the masters student who uses crutches as she has



**Reaching out:** Hanafiah is all for UM's empowerment programmes as it helps boost the students' confidence.

spina bifida. Nurul Diana Turidi, 20, said UM was her choice due to its reputation for being disabled-friendly.

"It is difficult to focus in class especially if I have to take down notes from the board."

"Having been diagnosed with nerve problems in both my eyes, I use a mini telescope to zoom in to the board," said the first year Bachelor of Economics student.

In fact, Muhammad Firdaus reveals that UM has 45 special needs students, most of whom stay in the Seventh Residential College.

Having disabled-friendly features also benefits staff as well, as Annie Lim Mei Woon, 55, found out.

Lim, who is now working at Sunway College as Academic Quality



**Misuse and abuse:** Lim says the able-bodied use toilets reserved for the disabled and leave them in a deplorable state.

Department head, became disabled as a result of an accident over 16 years ago.

Initially finding it challenging to move around the campus, Lim notes that the university has improved by leaps and bounds in providing barrier-free access and other facilities.

Her only grouse is with inconsiderate able-bodied toilet users who misuse the reserved toilets, which as a result, affects wheelchair users like her.

"Toilets for the disabled should be kept clean as there have been times when they are left in deplorable conditions."

"There should be campaigns to educate the public on the importance of hygiene."

Lim's sentiments indicate that while it is easy to put in physical infrastructure to cater to those with special needs, much more education is still needed to make larger society aware of the needs of those with special needs.

Muhammad Nur Iman says the biggest challenge is fending off society's prejudices against disabled people like him.

Jeslinda says there is a need for more programmes to influence public attitude to be more accepting and understanding.

For example, even in simple things like parking at malls and public areas, people are not giving way to the disabled.

She adds that even with the support of lecturers and coursemates, disability still carries a social stigma.

She cites a common scenario she sees whenever she uses the lift.

"When the lift door opens, people will take a step back, and just be rooted there and stare at me like I am some strange creature. That is rather offensive to me."

In her own small way, Jeslinda is determined to start a club to help those like her to focus on their capabilities and potential, instead of being fixated with what they cannot do.

While national and private institutions of higher learning should be lauded for the many disabled-friendly measures, it is clear that there is a much bigger battle that needs to be waged – that is changing the hearts and winning the minds of Malaysian society.